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Book Review: The Augusta Chronicle: Indomitable Voice of Dixie 1785-1960.

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BOOK REVIEWS

THE AUGUSTA CHRONICLE: Indomitable Voice of Dixie 1785-1960. By Earl L. Bell and Kenneth C. Crabbe. (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1960. xii, 273 pp. Illustrations, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$5.00.)

In 1856, during a lecture tour of the South, Thackeray wrote to a friend: "When I finished at Charlestown I went off to a queer little city called Augusta - a great broad street 2 miles long - old quaint looking shops . . . -- cows and negroes strolling about the sidewalks - plank roads - a happy dirty tranquility generally prevalent . . . I brought away a snug little purse from snug little Augusta. . . ."

At that time the "queer little city" had a long and honorable history, a population of about ten thousand, and a daily newspaper that traced its ancestry to a weekly founded in 1785. The *Augusta Chronicle*, now entering its 176th year of continuous publication, is the oldest newspaper in the South. Its evolution from an impoverished weekly with liberal tendencies to its present wealth, conservatism, and power is, with few exceptions, typical of the history of metropolitan journalism in the state and the region.

Thus this first book-length study of the *Chronicle* deserves attention. A definitive history of the paper, however, must await a writer who is skilled in the methods of historical research and sufficiently disinterested to take an objective view of his subject.

The authors of the present study, Earl Bell and Kenneth Crabbe, worked under one major handicap - their loyalty to Augusta's sister newspapers, the *Chronicle* and the *Herald*. Mr. Bell is a columnist and editorial writer for both; Mr. Crabbe is now associate editor of the *Herald*. It is easy to understand why their book occasionally smacks of promotion and publicity.

The authors are at their best in showing how the *Chronicle* has taken its stamp from its editors. In 1804 Editor Dermis Driscoll was calling a rival a "piney-woods pedagogue . . . who, from the poverty of his own talents, could not earn his salt for his mush." There were too few like Driscoll; and when in 1919 Tom Loyless left the paper, personal journalism was done. The *Chronicle* became more polite and less interesting.

The authors present a good case for the *Chronicle's* contributions to Augusta. Except for Editor Hamilton's "dream of river-control and development," Augusta would be a poorer city, periodically threatened by the flood waters of the Savannah. The *Chronicle* also has a distinguished record of service in such disasters as earthquake, fire, and flood. After the fire of 1892 a bone-tired editor wrote: "The *Chronicle* is in ashes; but here is the *Chronicle*."

There is little evidence, however, that the paper has given its city the courageous and enlightened leadership that Mark Etheridge and the *Telegraph* gave Macon or that Ralph McGill and the *Constitution* are giving Atlanta. The best example of a courageous editorial campaign in the *Chronicle* is Editor Loyless's attack on the bigotry that led to the lynching of Leo Frank. The authors seem equally proud of their paper's firm stand against integration. What they fail to see is that the *Chronicle's* attacks on the Supreme Court may be just as dangerous as the bigotry that Tom Loyless fought in 1915.

Readers are expected to take too much on faith. The authors call Pat Walsh a "great editor" and then neglect to document his greatness. They talk of the paper's "spark and dash" but give no examples to support their generalization. Even the case against the "thoroughly despicable" Civil War editor would be thrown out of court for lack of evidence.

For the most part the writing is competent, but here and there stylistic slips are showing. A man's body is a "frame;" a boy is a "youth of sixteen" or an "ambitious lad." An editor hurling himself into a battle for the right "thus forthrightly flew." "Near decade's end" and "newswise" stem from *Time* and Madison Avenue. But where did the authors conjure up this anticlimatic description of an excited city: "The town was all agog."

The writing reaches its nadir in the chapters on the present management of the *Chronicle*, vacillating uneasily between promotion copy and rural correspondence. Comforted to learn that a junior executive was "a participant in intramural swimming" in college, we are prepared for this optimistic prediction: "His associates foresee for him much success as he marches onward in his chosen field."

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